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Not All 'Predators' are the Same: Exploring the Spectrum of Questionable Journals

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Abstract

So-called 'predatory' publishing is often framed as an issue of unethical journal practices, but this perspective overlooks deeper structural problems in scholarly communication. The reliance on blacklists as a primary solution to identifying questionable journals fails to acknowledge the complexity of academic publishing and the broader systemic issues that contribute to unethical or controversial publishing practices. These include not only so-called 'predatory' journals but also concerns such as 'special issue-ization' and the rise of paper mills. Furthermore, the strategies used by emerging open-access mega-publishers increasingly resemble those employed by traditional and hybrid publishers, demonstrating that questionable practices are not confined to a single category of journals. This research in progress critically examines the characteristics of journals labeled as so-called 'predatory' and questions the effectiveness of static blacklists in scholarly assessment. Using a dataset of 2,755 journals from Predatory Reports, we systematically analyze their ISSN registration, subject classifications, accessibility, financial models, editorial transparency, and indexing status. While we recognize the limitations of blacklists, this dataset provides a basis for exploring broader patterns in academic publishing. Preliminary findings reveal that 24% of the journals became inaccessible after being listed, suggesting that some publishers shut down or rebrand to evade scrutiny. While ISSN registration is not mandatory, 13% of the journals in the dataset do not have one, which may indicate variations in registration practices. The geographical distribution of these journals is concentrated in India (31.45%), Switzerland (30.17%), and the United States (21.36%). This distribution highlights the global nature of these practices, spanning a range of publication models. The study also finds that 71% of these journals charge Article Processing Charges (APCs), while 23.7% fail to disclose APCs before submission, creating financial uncertainty for authors.

Rather than indiscriminately covering all fields, many journals now focus on STEM disciplines. These findings underscore the need for more nuanced, criteria-based evaluation frameworks that account for the complexities of scholarly publishing, moving beyond binary categorizations of journals as 'predatory' or legitimate.

Introduction

The phenomenon of so-called 'predatory' publishing is often portrayed as a pressing concern in academic research, but its implications extend beyond exploitative practices by questionable publishers. At its core, the issue reflects deeper systemic inequalities in scholarly communication, where access to resources and opportunities for publishing high-quality research are unevenly distributed (Krawczyk & Kulczycki, 2021; Kulczycki, 2023). While so-called 'predatory' publishers exploit the open-access model for financial gain, bypassing quality control and undermining trust in academic outputs (Grudniewicz et al., 2019), framing the problem purely in terms of "predators" and "victims" oversimplifies a much more complex issue.

Labeling journals as so-called 'predatory' or legitimate creates binary categorizations that fail to account for the diversity of practices among questionable publishers and the systemic issues driving these dynamics. This approach, often operationalized through blacklists, has significant limitations. Blacklists are difficult to maintain and update, particularly when dealing with journals backed by powerful commercial interests (Ryan, 2024; Silver, 2017). While open-access mega publishers have often been scrutinized for lapses in quality control (Fränti, 2024; Mills et al., 2024; Oviedo-García, 2021), recent research suggests that commercially driven publishing strategies extend beyond these newer models and are also present in traditional and hybrid publishers (Shu & Larivière, 2024). The broader challenge is not exclusive to a specific type of publisher but rather reflects evolving strategies across the scholarly publishing landscape (Nicholas et al., 2023). The debate surrounding these issues further highlights the limitations of a binary framework, as publishing practices increasingly defy simple categorization (Tsigaris & Teixeira da Silva, 2021).

Moreover, reliance on blacklists perpetuates inequities in research evaluation by prioritizing the journal's reputation and indexing status over the actual content or contributions of the research itself. This is particularly evident in research assessment systems that use journal-based metrics as proxies for scholarly quality, influencing hiring, funding, and promotion decisions (Mills & Inouye, 2021; Öztürk & Taşkın, 2024). In peripheral academic contexts, where scholars may face additional barriers to publishing in high-impact journals, these pressures push researchers toward venues that may later be labeled as questionable. Rather than reflecting individual choices alone, such publishing patterns often stem from structural inequalities within global academia (Mertkan et al., 2021; Taşkın et al., 2023).

Further complicating the landscape, large language models (LLMs) like ChatGPT introduce new challenges for academic publishing. These tools enable the rapid generation of text, which has already been exploited to produce papers for paper mills, amplifying unethical publishing practices (Kendall & Teixeira da Silva, 2024). However, LLMs are not the root cause of these issues. The exponential growth of the publish-or-perish culture, driven by quantity-focused research evaluation

systems, has created an environment where such technologies can flourish. While LLMs are positioned as a new scapegoat, the real challenge lies in addressing the systemic pressures that prioritize publication quantity over quality. Policymakers, editors, and publishers must develop strategies not only to mitigate the misuse of LLMs but also to reform evaluation systems that perpetuate these issues, ensuring that scholarly communication prioritizes meaningful contributions over sheer output. This research-in-progress does not aim to classify journals as 'predatory' or legitimate but instead critically examines the broader risks of such dichotomies. By analyzing factors such as accessibility, publication origins, subject categories, languages, and editorial practices, this study seeks to highlight the structural issues that contribute to so-called 'predatory' publishing. Ultimately, the goal is to inform policies that shift the focus from where research is published to the societal and scientific contributions it makes, promoting responsible and equitable research evaluation practices.

Methods

For this study, we utilized the list of so-called 'predatory' journals available on the Predatory Reports website, [1] as it represents one of the most extensive and up-to-date resources accessible. Despite the anonymity of its creators,[2] which is understandable given the challenges faced by earlier efforts in this field (Ryan, 2024; Silver, 2017), the list was selected for its broad scope and inclusion of diverse journal types. This allowed us to create a large dataset for in-depth examination.

While we do not endorse blacklists as a definitive tool for evaluating journal quality, we use this dataset as a starting point to analyze broader publishing patterns. Rather than assuming the journals listed are inherently unreliable, we examine their characteristics systematically to understand the diverse operational models that lead to their inclusion. Our study builds on previous research by focusing not only on journal attributes but also on their accessibility, financial practices, and indexing status over time, offering insights into how such classifications evolve.

To achieve this, we analyzed a dataset of 2,755 journals from the Predatory Reports list. The journals are systematically evaluated across multiple dimensions, and detailed data about their practices is being collected. The data collection focuses on key aspects of journal operations, grouped into the following categories:

- **Identification and registration:** This includes verifying whether the journal is registered in the ISSN portal, the associated country, and the accuracy of provided ISSN information.
- **Website and accessibility:** The website language, availability of an English version, clarity of scope (e.g., interdisciplinary or specific fields), and access to full-text articles or metadata are assessed.

[1] The list was downloaded on 12 September 2024 from https://predatoryjournals.org/predatory-journals.

[2] It is indicated in the website as: "We decided to remain anonymous so as not to be sued by companies whose practices are quite aggressive. As our reach grows on the internet, we are already receiving threats."

- **Financial practices:** The presence and transparency of APCs, including the cost, discount options, and details on how funds are utilized.
- **Editorial and peer review processes:** This involves checking for information on editorial boards, peer review processes, and guarantees of publication timelines (e.g., fast publication promises).
- **Indexing and metrics:** The journal's indexing status in citation indexes and bibliographic databases, along with the inclusion of citation metrics and their sources, are documented.
- **Publishing policies and licensing:** The presence of licensing policies (e.g., Creative Commons) and details on publishing rights and practices are recorded.
- **Transparency and contact information:** The availability of publisher contact details, such as email, phone, and physical addresses, as well as the credibility of listed editorial and reviewer boards.

This research is ongoing, and the collected data provides a foundation for understanding the diverse characteristics of these journals. In this paper, we present preliminary findings on the availability of journal websites, their geographic distribution, field distribution, and APC transparency. Further analysis of editorial practices, indexing status, and licensing policies will be conducted in future stages of this research.

Preliminary findings

Our initial analysis revealed that 24% of the journals listed on the Predatory Reports platform became inaccessible following their inclusion in the list. This finding highlights a significant issue: some journals associated with questionable practices often shut down their operations, remove published articles, or rebrand under a different name as soon as they are labeled. Additionally, we found that 13% of these journals are not registered in the ISSN portal, which may reflect variations in registration practices rather than a definitive indicator of legitimacy. The absence of an ISSN complicates efforts to track and evaluate these journals over time. Figure 1 shows the geographic distribution of journals with ISSN registration.

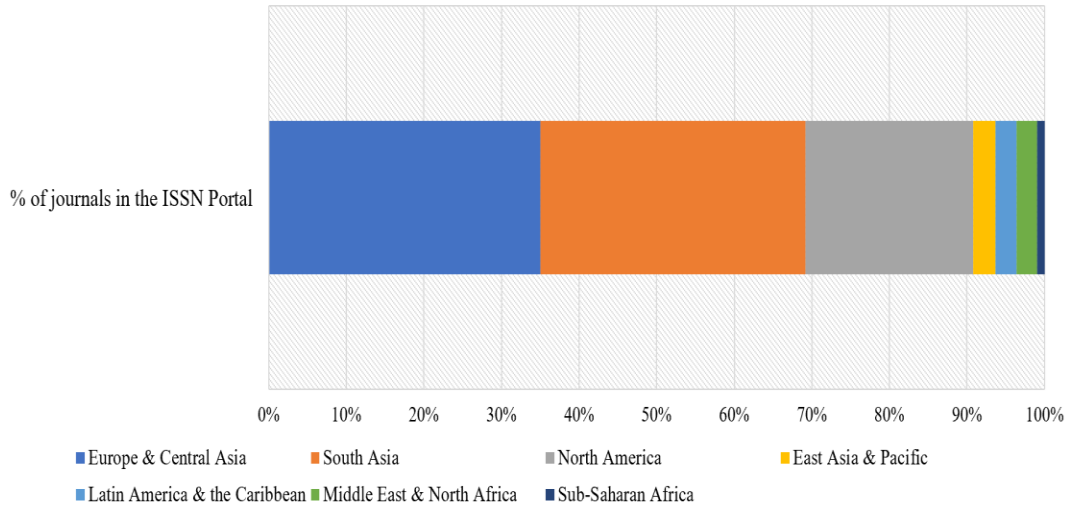

Figure 1. Geographic distribution of journals labeled as predatory that are registered in the ISSN Portal.

The distribution of journals labeled as so-called 'predatory' by country highlights significant global patterns in academic publishing. India accounts for the highest proportion of these journals (31.45%), followed by Switzerland (30.17%) and the United States (21.36%). Other notable contributors include Brazil (2.26%), Pakistan (1.57%), Turkey (1.53%), and Iran (1.03%). This distribution suggests that so-called 'predatory' publishing is not solely an issue of individual journal practices but is influenced by broader systemic and geopolitical factors. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the dataset, as lists such as Predatory Reports or Beall's list tend to focus on journals from peripheral academic systems and may not comprehensively capture journals operating within more established publishing networks (Krawczyk & Kulczycki, 2021).

The classification of journals by subject fields was based on their own declarations on their websites. Journals that explicitly indicated their focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) were categorized accordingly, while those emphasizing social sciences and humanities (SSH) were grouped separately. Journals that described themselves as interdisciplinary or covering multiple broad areas (e.g., sciences, social sciences, and humanities) were categorized as interdisciplinary. Additionally, journals that did not provide any subject classification on their websites were labeled as "unknown."

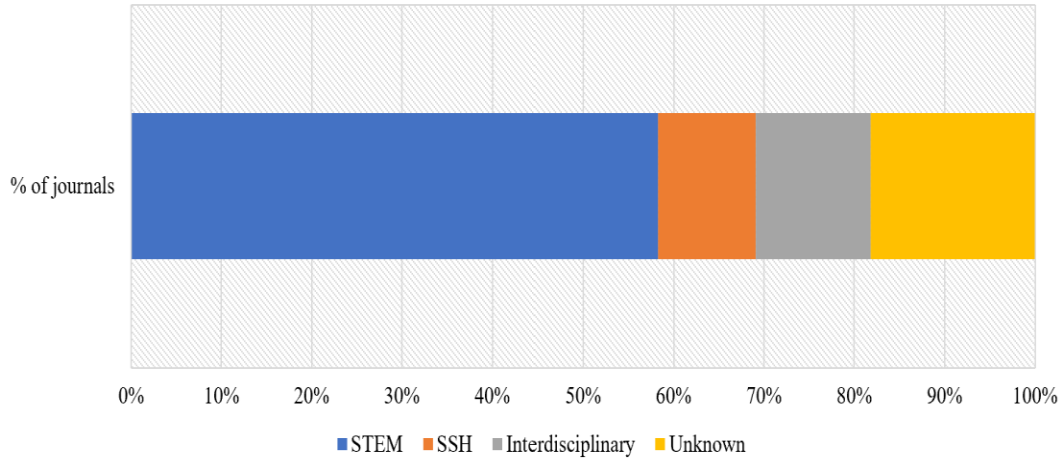

Figure 2. Field distribution of journals labeled as predatory.

The initial perception of so-called 'predatory' publishing is that it indiscriminately covers all fields without clear specialization. However, our data suggests that many of these journals now indicate specific subject areas for publication. This shift may reflect a response to increased scrutiny of broad-scope journals. However, prior research has highlighted that one questionable practice associated with these journals is publishing out-of-scope papers. Thus, while some journals claim subject specialization, this does not necessarily equate to maintaining field-specific editorial standards.

The analysis of APCs among journals labeled as so-called 'predatory' reveals that 71% require APCs, reinforcing the notion that financial gain can be a primary driver of their operations. However, 23.7% provide no clear information about APCs before submission, creating uncertainty for authors who may only learn about the charges after their manuscripts have been accepted. This lack of transparency is a key indicator of deceptive publishing practices. Interestingly, only 5% explicitly state that they do not require APCs, while an even smaller subset (0.08%) request payments as "donations." Future analysis will examine whether journals disclose how APC revenues are allocated, if such information is available on their websites.

Future steps

This research-in-progress has presented preliminary findings on ISSN registration and field classifications. Moving forward, we will expand the analysis to other key dimensions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of so-called 'predatory' journals.

One priority is tracking website availability over time to determine whether journals rebrand or disappear, suggesting adaptive strategies. We will also investigate financial transparency, focusing on APC disclosure and potential hidden costs, with the hypothesis that unclear APC policies contribute to author exploitation.

Editorial and peer review practices will be examined to assess transparency in editorial boards and peer review claims, particularly regarding fast-track publication

promises. Additionally, we will analyze indexing and citation metrics to verify impact claims and assess how these journals establish credibility.

Finally, we plan to study licensing and archiving policies to determine whether these journals ensure long-term access to published work. These ongoing analyses will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of questionable publishing practices, informing responsible research evaluation frameworks.

Conclusion

Our project moves beyond binary classifications of so-called 'predatory' journals to provide a more nuanced understanding of questionable publishing practices. Instead of relying on static blacklists, it systematically examines journal operations, financial models, indexing claims, and accessibility to reveal broader trends in scholarly publishing.

Beyond academic publishing, the findings inform research policy by promoting more transparent and responsible evaluation frameworks. By analyzing accessibility, editorial transparency, and financial disclosures, the project helps institutions, funding bodies, and scholars make more informed decisions, shifting the focus from journal labels to the quality and impact of research.

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Author contributions

ZT: Conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, visualization, supervision, writing-original draft | GD: Conceptualization, methodology, writing-review & editing | İSK, EU, ÖS, CBS: Methodology, data curation | EK: Conceptualization, methodology, supervision, writing-review & editing

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